The Call of the Cumberlands

By Charles Neville Buck

With Illustrations from Photographs of Scenes in the Play

SYNOPSIS.

On Misery creek Sally Miller finds George Lescott, a landscape painter, unconscious, and, after reviving him, goes for assistance. Spicer South, head of the family, tells Samson South and Sally that Jesse Purvy has been shot and that Samson is suspected of the crime. Samson denies it. The shooting of Jesse Purvy breaks the truce in the Hollman-South feud. Samson reproves Tamarack Spicer for telling Sally that Jim Hollman is hunting with bloodhounds the man who shot Purvy. The bloodhounds lose the trail at Spicer South's door. Lescott discovers artistic ability in Samson. While sketching with Lescott on the mountain, Tamarack discovers Samson to a jeering crowd of mountaineers. Samson thrashes him and denounces him as the "truce-buster" who shot Purvy. Lescott tries to persuade Samson to go to New York with him and develop his talent. Sally, loyal but heartbroken, furthers Lescott's efforts.

CHAPTER VI—Continued.

"Thar's a-goin' ter be a dancin' party over ter Wile McCager's mill come Saturday," he insinuatingly suggested. "I reckon ye'll go over thar with me, won't ye, Sally?"

He waited for her usual delighted assent, but Sally only told him absently and without enthusiasm that she would "study about it." At last, however, her restraint broke, and, looking up, she abruptly demanded:

"Air ye a-goin' away, Samson?"

"Who's been a-talkin' ter ye?" demanded the boy, angrily.

For a moment, the girl sat silent. Finally, she spoke in a grave voice:

"Hit hain't nothin' ter git mad about, Samson. The artist man 'lowed as how ye had a right ter go down thar, an' git an eddication." She made a weary gesture toward the great beyond.

"He hadn't ought to of told ye, Sally. If I'd been plumb sartin in my mind, I'd a-told ye myself—not but what I knows," he hastily amended, "thet he meant hit friendly."

"Air ye a-goin'?"

"I'm studyin' about hit."

He awaited objection, but none came. Then, with a piquing of his masculine vanity, he demanded:

"Hain't ye a-keerin', Sally, whether I goes, or not?"

The girl grew rigid. Her fingers on the crumbling plank of the stile's top tightened and gripped hard. Her face did not betray her, nor her voice, though she had to gulp down a rising lump in her throat before she could answer calmly.

"I think ye had ought to go, Samson."

The boy was astonished. He had avoided the subject for fear of her opposition—and tears.

Then, slowly, she went on:

"There hain't nothin' in these here hills fer ye, Samson. Down thar, ye'll see lots of things thet's new—an' civilized an' beautiful! Ye'll see lots of gals thet kin read an' write, gals dressed up in all kinds of fancy fixin's." Her glib words ran out and ended in a sort of inward gasp.

Compliment came hardly and awkwardly to Samson's lips. He reached for the girl's hand, and whispered:

"I reckon I won't see no gals thet's as purty as you be, Sally. I reckon ye knows, whether I goes or stays, we're a-goin' ter git married."

She drew her hand away, and laughed, a little bitterly. In the last day, she had ceased to be a child, and become a woman with all the soul-aching possibilities of a woman's intuitions.

"Samson," she said, "I hain't askin' ye ter make me no promises. When ye sees them other gals—gals thet kin read an' write—I reckon mebby ye'll think diff'rent. I can't hardly spell out printin' in the fust reader.'

Her lover's voice was scornful of the imagined dangers, as a recruit may be of the battle terrors—before he has been under fire. He slipped his arm about her and drew her over to him.

"Honey," he said, "ye needn't fret about thet. Readin' an' writin' can't make no difference fer a woman. Hit's mighty important fer a man, but you're a gal."

"You're a-goin' ter think diff'rent after awhile," she insisted. "When ye goes, I hain't a-goin' ter be expectin' ye ter come back . . . But"—the resolution in her voice for a moment quavered as she added—"but God knows I'm a-goin' ter be hopin'!"

"Sally!" The boy rose, and paced up and down in the road. "Air ye goin' ter be ag'inst me, too? Don't ye see that I wants ter have a chanst? Can't ye trust me? I'm jest a-tryin' to amount to something. I'm plumb tired of bein' ornery an' no 'count."

She nodded.

"I've done told ye," she said, wearily, "thet I thinks ye ought ter do hit."

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Lescott and Samson discussed the matter frequently. At times the boy was obstinate in his determination to remain; at other times he gave way to the yearnings for change and opportunity.

The dance on Saturday was to be something more portentous than a mere frolic. It would be a clan gathering to which the South adherents would come riding up and down Misery and its tributaries from "nigh aboute" and "over yon." From forenoon until after midnight, shuffle, jig and fiddling would hold high, if rough, carnival. But, while the younger folk abandoned themselves to these diversions, the grayer heads would gather in more serious conclave. Jesse Purvy had once more beaten back death, and his mind had probably been devising, during those bed-ridden days and nights, plans of reprisal. According to current report, Purvy had announced that his would-be assassin dwelt on Misery, and was "marked down." So, there were obvious exigencies which the Souths must prepare to meet. In particular, the clan must thrash out to definite understanding the demoralizing report that Samson South, their logical leader, meant to abandon them, at a crisis when war-clouds were thickening.

The painter had finally resolved to cut the Gordian knot, and leave the mountains. He had trained on Samson to the last piece all his artillery of argument. The case was now submitted with the suggestion that the boy take three months to consider, and that, if he decided affirmatively, he should notify Lescott in advance of his coming. He proposed sending Samson

"I Reckon Hit's A-goin' Ter Jest About Kill Me."

a small library of carefully picked books, which the mountaineer eagerly agreed to devour in the interval.

Lescott consented, however, to remain over Saturday, and go to the dance, since he was curious to observe what pressure was brought to bear on the boy, and to have himself a final word of argument after kinsmen had spoken.

Saturday morning came after a night of torrential rain, which had left the mountains steaming under a reek of fog and pitching clouds.

But, as the morning wore on, the sun fought its way to view in a scrap of overhead blue. From log cabins and plank houses up and down Misery and its tributaries, men and women began their hegira toward the mill. Lescott rode in the wake of Samson, who had Sally on a pillow at his back. They came before noon to the mouth of Dry-hole creek, and the house of Wile McCager. Already, the picket fence was lined with tethered horses and mules.

From the interior of the house came the sounds of fiddling, though these strains of "Turkey in the Straw" were only by way of prelude. Lescott felt, though he could not say just what concrete thing told him, that under the shallow note of merry-making brooded the major theme of a troublesome problem. The seriousness was below the surface, but insistently depressing. He saw, too, that he himself was mixed up with it in a fashion, which might become dangerous, when a few jugs of white liquor had been emptied.

While the young persons danced and "sparked" within, and the more truculent lads escaped to the road to pass the jug, and forecast with youthful war-fever "cleanin' out the Hollmans," the elders were deep in ways and means. If the truce could be preserved for its unexpired period of three years, it was, of course, best. In that event, crops could be cultivated, and lives saved. But, if Jesse Purvy chose to regard his shooting as a breach of terms, and struck, he would strike hard, and, in that event, best defense lay in striking first. Samson would soon be twenty-one. That he would take his place as head of the clan had until now never been questioned—and he was talking of desertion. For that, a pink-skinned foreigner, who wore a woman's bow of ribbon at his collar, was to blame. The question of loyalty must be squarely put up to Samson, and it must be done today. His answer must be definite and unequivocal. As a guest of Spicer South, Lescott was entitled to that consideration which is accorded ambassadors.

None the less, the vital affair of the clan could not be balked by consideration for a stranger, who, in the opinion of the majority, should be driven from the country as an insidious mischief-maker. Ostensibly, the truce still held, but at no time since its signing had matters been so freighted with the menace of a gathering storm. The attitude of each faction was that of several men standing quiet with guns trained on one another's breasts. Each hesitated to fire, knowing that to pull the trigger meant to die himself, yet fearing that another trigger might at any moment be drawn. Purvy dared not have Samson shot out of hand, because he feared that the Souths would claim his life in return, yet he feared to let Samson live. On the other hand, if Purvy fell, no South could balance his death, except Spicer or Samson. Any situation that might put conditions to a moment of issue would either prove that the truce was being observed, or open the war—and yet each faction was guarding against such an event as too fraught with danger. One thing was certain. By persuasion or force, Lescott must leave, and Samson must show himself to be the youth he had been thought, or the confessed and repudiated renegade. Those questions, today must answer. It was a difficult situation, and promised an eventful entertainment. Whatever conclusion was reached as to the artist's future, he was, until the verdict came in, a visitor, and, unless liquor inflamed some reckless trouble-hunter, that fact would not be forgotten. Possibly, it was as well that Tamarack Spicer had not arrived.

Lescott himself realized the situation in part, as he stood at the door of the house watching the scene inside.

There was, of course, no round dancing—only the shuffle and jig—with champions contending for the honor of their sections.

In the group about the door, Lescott passed a youth with tow-white hair and very pink cheeks. The boy was the earliest to succumb to the temptation of the moonshine jug, a temptation which would later claim others. He was reeling crazily, and his albino eyes were now red and inflamed.

"Thet's ther damned furriner thet's done turned Samson inter a gal," proclaimed the youth, in a thick voice.

The painter paused, and looked back. The boy was reaching under his coat with hands that had become clumsy and unresponsive.

"Let me git at him," he shouted, with a wild whoop and a dash toward the painter.

Lescott said nothing, but Sally had heard, and stepped swiftly between.

"You've got ter git past me fust, Buddy," she said, quietly. "I reckon ye'd better run on home, an' git yore mammy ter put ye ter bed."

CHAPTER VII.

Several soberer men closed around the boy, and after disarming him, led him away grumbling and muttering, while Wile McCager made apologies to the guest.

"Jimmy's jest a peevish child," he explained. "A drop or two of licker makes him skittish. I hopes ye'll look over hit."

Jimmy's outbreak was interesting to Lescott chiefly as an indication of what might follow. Unwilling to introduce discord by his presence, and involve Samson in quarrels on his account, he suggested riding back to Misery, but the boy's face clouded at the suggestion.

"Ef they kain't be civil ter my friends," he said, shortly, "they've got ter account ter me. You stay right hyar, and I'll stay clost to you. I done come hyar today ter tell 'em that they mustn't meddle in my business."

A short while later, Wile McCager invited Samson to come out to the mill, and the boy nodded to Lescott an invitation to accompany him.

The mill, dating back to pioneer days, sat by its race with its shaft now idle. It looked to Lescott, as he approached, like a scrap of landscape torn from some medieval picture, and the men about its door seemed medieval, too; bearded and gaunt, hard-thewed and sullen.

All of them who stood waiting were men of middle age, or beyond. A number were gray-haired, but they were all of cadet branches. Many of them, like Wile McCager himself, did not bear the name of South, and Samson was the eldest son of the eldest son.

"Samson," began old Wile McCager, clearing his throat and taking up his duty as spokesman, "we're all your kinfolks here, an' we aimed ter ask ye about this here report thet yer 'lowin' ter leave the mountings?"

"What of hit?" countered the boy.

"Hit looks mighty like the war's a-goin' ter be on ag'in pretty soon. Air ye a-goin' ter quit, or air ye a-goin' ter stick? Thet's what we wants ter know."

"I didn't make this here truce, an' I hain't a-goin' ter bust hit," said the boy, quietly. "When the war commences, I'll be hyar. Ef I hain't hyar in the meantime, hit hain't nobody's business. I hain't accountable ter no man but pap, an' I reckon, whar he is, he knows whether I'm a-goin' ter keep my word."

There was a moment's silence, then Wile McCager put another question:

"Ef ye're plumb sot on gettin' larnin' why don't ye git hit right hyar in these mountings?"

Samson laughed derisively.

"Who'll I git hit from?" he caustically inquired. "Ef the mountain won't come ter Mohamet, Mohamet's got ter go ter the mountain, I reckon."

Caleb Wiley rose unsteadily to his feet, his shaggy beard trembling with wrath and his voice quavering with senile indignation.

"Hev ye done got too damned good fer yore kinfolks, Samson South?" he shrilly demanded. "Hev ye done been follerin' atter this here puny witch-doctor twell ye can't keep a civil tongue in yer head fer yore elders? I'm in favor of runnin' this here furriner outen the country with tar an' feathers on him. Furthermore, I'm in favor of cleanin' out the Hollmans. I was jest a-sayin' ter Bill—"

"Never mind what ye war jest a-sayin'," interrupted the boy, flushing redly to his cheekbones, but controlling his voice. "Ye've done said enough a'ready. Ye're a right old man, Caleb, an' I reckon thet gives ye some license ter shoot off yore face, but ef any of them no-'count, shif'less boys of yores wants ter back up what ye says, I'm ready ter go out thar an' make 'em eat hit. I hain't a-goin' ter answer no more questions."

There was a commotion of argument, until "Black Dave" Jasper, a saturnine giant, whose hair was no blacker than his expression, rose, and a semblance of quiet greeted him as he spoke.

"Mebby, Samson, ye've got a right ter take the studs this a-way, an' ter refuse ter answer our questions, but we've got a right ter say who kin stay in this hyar country. Ef ye 'lows ter quit us, I reckon we kin quit you—and, if we quits ye, ye hain't nothin' more ter us then no other boy thet's gettin' too big fer his breeches. This furriner is a visitor here today, an' we don't 'low ter hurt him—but he's got ter go. We don't want him round hyar no longer." He turned to Lescott. "We're a-givin' ye fair warnin', stranger. Ye hain't our breed. After this, ye stays on Misery at yore own risk—an' hit's a-goin' ter be plumb risky. That thar's final."

"This man," blazed the boy, before Lescott could speak, "is a-visitin' me an' Unc' Spicer. When ye wants him ye kin come up thar an' git him. Every damned man of ye kin come. I hain't a-sayin' how many of ye'll go back. He was 'lowin' that he'd leave hyar ter-morrer mornin', but after this I'm a-tellin' ye he hain't a-goin' ter do hit. He's a-goin' ter stay es long es he likes, an' nobody hain't a-goin' ter run him off." Samson took his stand before the painter, and swept the group with his eyes. "An' what's more," he added, "I'll tell ye another thing. I hadn't plumb made up my mind ter leave the mountings, but ye've done settled hit fer me. I'm a-goin'."

There was a low murmur of anger, and a voice cried out from the rear:

"Let him go. We hain't got no use fer damn cowards."

"Whoever said thet's a liar!" shouted the boy. Lescott, standing at his side, felt that the situation was more than parlous. But, before the storm could break, some one rushed in, and whispered to Wile McCager a message that caused him to raise both hands above his head, and thunder for attention.

"Men," he roared, "listen ter me! This here hain't no time fer squabblin' amongst ourselves. We're all Souths. Tamarack South has done gone ter Hixon, an' got inter trouble. He's locked up in the jailhouse."

"We're all hyar," screamed old Caleb's high, broken voice. "Let's go an' take him out."

Samson's anger had died. He turned, and held a whispered conversation with McCager, and, at its end, the host of the day announced briefly:

"Samson's got somethin' ter say ter ye. So long as he's willin' ter stand by us, I reckon we're willin' ter listen ter Henry South's boy."

"I hain't got no use for Tamarack Spicer," said the boy, succinctly, "but I don't 'low ter let him lay in no jailhouse, unlessen he's got a right ter be thar. What's he charged with?"

But no one knew that. A man supposedly close to the Hollmans, but in reality an informer for the Souths, had seen him led into the jailyard by a posse of a half-dozen men, and had seen the iron-barred doors close on him. That was all, except that the Hollman forces were gathering in Hixon, and, if the Souths went there en masse, a pitched battle must be the inevitable result. The first step was

"This Hain't No Time for Squabblin' Amongst Ourselves."

to gain accurate information and an answer to one vital question. Was Tamarack held as a feud victim, or was his arrest legitimate? How to learn that was the problem. To send a body of men was to invite bloodshed. To send a single inquirer was to deliver him over to the enemy.

"Air you men willin' ter take my word about Tamarack?" inquired Samson. There was a clamorous assent, and the boy turned to Lescott.

"I wants ye ter take Sally home with ye. Ye'd better start right away, afore she heers any of this talk. Hit would fret her. Tell her I've had ter go 'cross ther country a piece, ter see a sick man. Don't tell her whar I'm a-goin'." He turned to the others. "I reckon I've got yore promise thet Mr. Lescott hain't a-goin' ter be bothered afore I gits back?"

Wile McCager promptly gave the assurance.

"I gives ye my hand on hit."

"I seed Jim Asberry loafin' round jest beyond ther ridge, as I rid over hyar," volunteered the man who had brought the message.

"Go slow now, Samson. Don't be no blame fool," dissuaded Wile McCager. "Hixon's plumb full of them Hollmans, an' they're likely ter be full of licker—hit's Saturday. Hit's apt ter be shore death fer ye ter try ter ride through Main street—ef ye gits thet far. Ye dassent do hit."

"I dast do anything!" asserted the boy, with a flash of sudden anger. "Some liar 'lowed awhile ago thet I was a coward. All right, mebby I be. Unc' Wile, keep the boys hyar tell ye hears from me—an' keep 'em sober." He turned and made his way to the fence where his mule stood hitched.

When Samson crossed the ridge and entered the Hollman country, Jim Asberry, watching from a hilltop point of vantage, rose and mounted the horse that stood hitched behind a nearby screen of rhododendron bushes and young cedars. Sometimes, he rode just one bend of the road in Samson's rear. Sometimes, he took short cuts, and watched his enemy pass. But always he held him under a vigilant eye. Finally, he reached a wayside store where a local telephone gave communication with Hollman's Mammoth Department store.

"Jedge," he informed, "Samson South's done left the party et ther mill, an' he's a-ridin' towards town. Shall I git him?"

"Is he comin' by hisself?" inquired the storekeeper.

"Yes."

"Well, jest let him come on. We can tend ter him hyar, ef necessary." So Jim withheld his hand, and merely shadowed, sending bulletins, from time to time.

It was about three o'clock when Samson started. It was near six when he reached the ribbon of road that loops down into town over the mountain. His mule was in a lather of sweat. He knew that he was being spied upon, and that word of his coming was traveling ahead of him. What he did not know was whether or not it suited Jesse Purvy's purpose that he should slide from his mule, dead, before he turned homeward. If Tamarack had been seized as a declaration of war, the chief South would certainly not be allowed to return. If the arrest had not been for feud reasons, he might escape. That was the question which would be answered with his life or death.

The "jailhouse" was a small building of home-made brick, squatting at the rear of the courthouse yard. As Samson drew near, he saw that some ten or twelve men, armed with rifles, separated from groups and disposed themselves behind the tree trunks and the stone coping of the well. None of them spoke, and Samson pretended that he had not seen them. He rode his mule at a walk, knowing that he was rifle-covered from a half-dozen windows. At the hitching rack directly beneath the county building, he flung his reins over a post, and, swinging his rifle at his side, passed cautiously along the brick walk to the jail. The men behind the trees edged around their covers as he went, keeping themselves protected, as squirrels creep around a trunk when a hunter is lurking below. Samson halted at the jail wall, and called the prisoner's name. A tousled head and surly face appeared at the barred window, and the boy went over and held converse from the outside.

"How in hell did ye git into town?" demanded the prisoner.

"I rid in," was the short reply. "How'd ye git in the jailhouse?"

The captive was shamefaced.

"I got a leetle too much licker, an' I was shootin' out the lights last night," he confessed.

"What business did ye have hyar in Hixon?"

"I jest slipped in ter see a gal."

Samson leaned closer, and lowered his voice.

"Does they know thet ye shot them shoots at Jesse Purvy?"

Tamarack turned pale.

"No," he stammered, "they believe you done hit."

Samson laughed. He was thinking of the rifles trained on him from a dozen invisible rests.

"How long air they a-goin' ter keep ye hyar?" he demanded.

"I kin git out tomorrer ef I pays the fine. Hit's ten dollars."

"And' ef yo don't pay the fine?"

"Hit's a dollar a day."

"I reckon ye don't 'low ter pay hit, do ye?"

"I 'lowed mebby ye mout pay hit fer me, Samson."

"Ye done 'lowed plumb wrong. I come hyar ter see ef ye needed help, but hit 'pears ter me they're lettin' yo off easy."

He turned on his heel, and went back to his mule. The men behind the trees began circling again. Samson mounted, and, with his chin well up, trotted back along the main street. It was over. The question was answered. The Hollmans regarded the truce as still effective. The fact that they were permitting him to ride out alive was a wordless assurance of that. Incidentally, he stood vindicated in the eyes of his own people.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Hadn't Looked for That.

"When we bought dear little Bobby the electric flashlight he had been begging for so long," says a mother, "we never anticipated that the first time we had company he would hold it up to the guest's ear and say: 'Oh, I just want to see if your ear is clean!'"

Riches From Gift Bestowed.

When you give away happiness you all de time gits richer an' richer in it.—Atlanta Constitution.

The Censor.

The Washington Star relates that Mayor Baker of Cleveland, in defense of a political movement that had been attacked, said the other day:

"It's an honest movement and a straightforward movement, and they who attack it are as censorious as the Seabright old maid.

"A Seabright old maid was talking to a sunburned college boy on the beach. A pretty girl passed and the old maid said:

"'There goes Minnie Summers. You took her to the hop last evening, didn't you?'

"'Yes,' said the college boy, and he added politely: 'As I was taking leave of Miss Summers after the hop it dawned upon me—'

"'It dawned!' said the old maid. 'You kept her out till dawn! That's what these new dances lead up to!'"

Willie Knew.

Some time ago the teacher of a public school was instructing a class in geography, and when it came time to hand out a few questions she turned to Willie Smith.

"Willie," she said, "can you tell me what is one of the principal products of the West Indies?"

"No, ma'am," frankly answered Willie, after a moment's hesitation.

"Just think a bit," encouragingly returned the teacher; "where does the sugar come from that you use at your house?"

"Sometimes from the store," answered Willie, "and sometimes we borrow it from the next-door neighbor."

The most common form of pessimism is the belief that a good beginning makes a bad ending.